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CIRCULAR LETTER

FROM THE

MINISTERS

OF THE

General Baptist Denomination,

ASSEMBLED AT

St. Ives, Huntingdonshire,

June 10th, and 11th, 1778.

To their respective CHURCHES.

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LONDON:

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DEARLY BELOVED BRETHREN,

**B**EING assembled together, at this time, as your messengers and representatives, and united in our endeavours to promote the welfare of the several churches which our kind God and Father hath, in the course of his good providence, called us to serve, we hope it will be accepted as an evidence of that tender and cordial regard we have for you, if we take this method of suggesting to you a few hints, by way of admonition, respecting the nature of that fellowship which you have one with another, and the several obligations incumbent upon you in consequence of that fellowship:

Fellowship, you know, " is a joint-interest in certain privileges to which each " member has a right or title," and implies an united engagement to perform those duties, and prosecute those methods which are requisite in order to a more convenient participation of these privileges. The fellowship of professing Christians in a church-relation, is a joint-interest in the various privileges

privileges and advantages which Jesus, their Lord and head, hath graciously bestowed upon them, in order to their improvement in the divine life, and their advancement in holiness and happiness. This they voluntarily take upon themselves by the appointment of their all-wise and all-compassionate Saviour.

The privileges of church fellowship are many, and their value inexpressible. Hereby believers have acquaintance one with another, and can therefore better exhort, admonish, and comfort one another, according to the injunctions which the apostles so frequently give respecting these important duties.

All real Christians ought to love one another, as children of the same common Father, wherever their places of abode are, or however they may be distinguished by names, sentiments, or forms of worship, "for the *truth's* sake, which is in them:" and church-fellowship gives them an opportunity of making this love manifest; and at the same time, more powerfully cements, and unites their hearts together, and thereby excites in each a desire to give those demonstrations of it, which the scriptures require, and the spirit of genuine Christianity will naturally dictate, in those who are, in reality and truth, possessed of it.

As the consequence of real Christian love,

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thus strengthened and inflamed by the intimacy connected with church-fellowship, there will be such a sympathetic sense of our brethren's distresses, as will naturally engage our minds to "*bear one another's burdens*;" to "weep with those who weep," "and to rejoice with those who rejoice," and to pursue every laudable method of alleviating the sorrows of those who are attended with them, and promoting the present and future happiness of all with whom we are united.

The two positive institutions of the New Testament, Baptism and the Supper of the Lord, ought to be administered to those who believe; the former only once, to those who are admitted as proper subjects of fellowship, in order to their participation of all church-privileges; and the other to be frequently repeated, and continued to the end of life; for the edification and comfort of all the members of the church.

As there are, of necessity, both spiritual and temporal concerns to be managed in every church of Christ, suitable persons ought to be set apart for the management of them, such as the body of the members themselves approve of as duly qualified for this kind of labors. Those who manage the temporal concerns of the church, are, in scripture, called deacons; those who manage her spiritual concerns, elders, ministers, or pastors.



pastors. These, under the authority of Jesus Christ, execute their office, intirely, and only, by the consent and approbation of the church; and the members of the church have a full right to judge of the qualifications of such officers, and their performance of what their office requires; and full power to choose or refuse such officers, as may be judged most conducive to the edification of their own souls, and the advantage and credit of religion.

In every part of church-business, in maintaining and improving order and discipline in it, with whatever relates hereto, or is consequent hereupon, the power is entirely lodged in the church, (the officers being included) nor can her members justly give away this power to any other person or persons whatsoever. Only, in all these cases, the New Testament ought to be their rule, and every part of church-work ought to be attended to, and performed, intirely according to the directions contained in this inspired and infallible book.

No one is a proper subject of church-fellowship, nor ought to be admitted to church-ordinances, who does not give credible evidence that he is converted to God, and pay an universal and unreserved regard to the duties enjoined upon believers in the New Testament.

These remarks, beloved brethren, appear

us agreeable to the word of truth, and contain the instructions which, you know, we are, from time to time, explaining and recommending to you, as opportunity admits, and necessity requires, in the course of our ministry. Yet we think it proper to lay them before you in this brief manner, and wish you to observe them, and to keep them in memory; and would farther, offer to your attentive regard, several obligations incumbent upon you, in consequence of your fellowship one with another, in the church of Christ.

I. You will easily see, brethren, how necessary it is, with all your might, to endeavour that you may be all of one mind, and one heart; and that the unity of the spirit may be preserved among you, in the bond of peace. Reason, scripture and fact, all conspire to prove that “a house divided against itself cannot stand,” and that nothing more effectually obstructs the welfare of a Christian church, than feuds, animosities, contentions, and discord.

II. You are under an indispensable necessity of being faithful and free one with another. Without this, you cannot successfully perform the several duties of exhortation, reproof, admonition and comfort, which are, by the appointment of our Lord and Saviour continually incumbent upon you, and are to be carefully attended

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to on the one hand, and accepted on the other, for the welfare of your precious and immortal souls here and hereafter, in order that your spirit and conversation may be such as become the gospel of Christ, and that you may take sweet counsel together, and conduct the affairs of the blessed Redeemer's kingdom with unanimity, honor, and success.

Now we have mentioned *reproof* to you, brethren, we would drop a word particularly on this very important, though we fear, much neglected duty. When any one acts contrary to the profession he makes, we need not give you any proof that it is your duty to reprove such a person. This is manifest from the awful importance of that cause in which you are embarked, from the relation you stand in to each other, as well as from the injunctions of scripture. Nor is any thing more evident than the propriety and necessity of doing this *in meekness and love*, at the same time that you do it with faithfulness and freedom. If any one should unhappily be guilty of personal offences against any brother or sister, our Lord has given the offended person a plain rule, in such a case, which we wish, for your own sakes, for our sakes, and for the sake of our blessed Saviour, whom you profess to serve and honor, you would never forget. "If thy brother trespass against thee," says our adorable Redeemer



Redeemer, "go, and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee thou hast gained thy brother; but if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he neglect to hear them, tell it to the church; but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican." *Matt. xviii. 15, &c.*

III. You are under the strongest obligations to take every one his part in every work of duty and difficulty which is necessary to be undertaken in order to promote the interest of Jesus Christ, lest one should be eased and another burthened. If any one draw back in these cases, the consequences of such conduct are dreadful. It weakens the hands, and afflicts the minds of others; it is a very bad example to those who are capable of being influenced by it. Too frequently it sows the seeds of contention and discord in the church. Besides, we beseech you to remember, brethren, that when any circumstance of this kind occurs, every member of the church feels the unhappy effects of it, and therefore every member should endeavour to avoid it. And whatever happiness a church enjoys by the united efforts here recommended, every member shares in such happiness. Remember also, brethren,

brethren, that you are all partakers in the love of God, and the rich advantages he bestows upon you in church-fellowship. You are, therefore, under every imaginable obligation to unite in every effort by which these privileges may be preserved to you, and most advantageously enjoyed by you.

IV. As the ministration of the word and ordinances is one of those precious advantages you enjoy in church-fellowship, and both the chief support of them, and the chief means of your edification by them; and your edification will be promoted, under the blessing of God, in proportion to the liveliness, spirituality and power with which we minister among you, admitting you make good improvement of our ministrations; and as we can of our own selves do nothing; it hence follows, that it is your incumbent duty, and will greatly contribute to your prosperity, to be earnest in prayer for the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ to be poured down upon us, to qualify us for, and attend us in, every part of our ministerial work. Therefore, "Brethren, pray for us."

V. As the blessed God himself esteems, and every lively and well-instructed Christian will certainly esteem a name and a place in the church of Christ, such as you enjoy, better than of sons and of daughters; it is incumbent upon you to be very thankful for the benefits you enjoy in this respect—to attend

attend diligently to every ordinance, and not to neglect meetings for keeping up order and discipline—to endeavour to the utmost of your power, to make good improvement of every advantage which the God of love hath graciously put into your hands, for the nourishment and comfort of your souls, and for the leading of you on with safety, credit, and pleasure, to the regions of consummate and endless felicity. O brethren! give thanks unto the Lord at all times, for the honor he has conferred upon you, and as he has advanced you to great dignity, in comparison with which, crowns and kingdoms are mere trifles; we, as the “*joint-labourers of God*,” for your salvation, beseech you that ye “receive not the grace “of God,” in this wondrous manifestation of it, “in vain,” as you certainly will, if your souls do not hereby grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Saviour Jesus Christ.

VI. You are thus highly favoured of God, that, in the enjoyment of these great privileges, you may be “trees of righteousness, “the planting of the Lord, that he may “be glorified,” i. e. That God may be glorified by your fruitfulness in every good word and work. It is therefore incumbent upon you, brethren, to walk humbly with God, and to act conscientiously before him, and zealously for him, in every situation,  
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and in every relation, in which the Lord in the course of his wise providence, may place you. By this means, your light will so shine before men, that they will see your good works, and glorify your Father, who is in heaven.

To conclude, let the awful charge of your souls, committed unto us, the regard we would ever have for the honor of God our Saviour; and especially, the relation we stand in to you, and our tender regard for your present and eternal welfare, apologize for us, while we open, as it were, our very hearts to you, and say, "Brethren, "dearly beloved, and longed for, our joy "and crown, so stand fast in the Lord, "dearly beloved." And, "if there be any "consolation in Christ, if any comfort of "love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if "any bowels and mercies, fulfil ye our joy, "that ye be like-minded, having the same "love, being of one accord, and of one "mind." "We beseech you, brethren, "and exhort you, by the Lord Jesus, that "as ye have received of us how ye ought "to walk, and to please God, so ye would "abound more and more." In hopes that you will keep these exhortations in mind, and will, in a practical regard to them, press forward towards the mark, for the prize of your high calling of God in Christ Jesus, and that you will hereafter be our  
joy,

joy, and crown of rejoicing, through  
never ending ages, we subscribe our-  
selves,

Dearly beloved Brethren,

your faithful,

and ready Servants,

for Jesus' sake,

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FRANCIS SMITH

JOHN GRIMLEY

NATHANIEL PICKERING

WILLIAM THOMPSON

WILLIAM SMITH

JOHN TARRATT

DAN TAYLOR

JONATHAN SCOTT

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